

**A National Agenda for the Environment and the Aging: Setting Priorities for Research and Education to Address Environmental Hazards That Threaten the Health of Older Persons.**

**Hearing Statement  
Karen S. Peterson, RN, MPH  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
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I am a seventy-one year old senior citizen who is fully employed as a faculty member and administrator with the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health. I do believe that I am worth more than 3/5 of a person and when I retire this year and become even more involved in community activities I still will be worth more than 3/5 of a person. I am fortunate that I am in good health. The point I want to make with my statement is not to argue, specifically, against the "Senior Death Discount," the math that allows polluters to continue polluting rather than protect my health and the health of all Americans. My argument is to be, in the words of Rachel Carson, to "foresee and forestall," (Raffensperger and Tickner, 1999, pp. 10-11), to minimize potential harm to present and future generations.

Rachel Carson was a Western Pennsylvania native. More than forty years ago, she noted the connection between pesticides and the physiological changes that would lead to the development of cancer. She was, in fact, dying from breast cancer, when she testified before a U.S. Senate subcommittee about pesticide pollution in the early 1960s (Lear, 1997, pages 4 & 454). Devra Davis, another Western Pennsylvania native, states in her book, *When Smoke Ran Like Water: Tales of Environmental Deception and the Battle Against Pollution* (2002), that by 1998, the World Health Organization confirmed

that breast cancer had become the most common cancer in women worldwide (Davis, p.165). She raises the question (as Carson did) about the association between environmental factors and cancer.

I use this example of cancer because, with cancer as well as other chronic health conditions, we do not have all of the answers concerning risk factors, as Davis (2002) observes. That does not mean, however, that we should wait for conclusive evidence. Again, as Davis (2002, p. 190) states, "We build bridges and buildings based on safety factors. We make them stronger than need be so that they will survive unexpected assaults." In other words, we need to apply the "Precautionary Principle" (Raffensperger and Tickner, 1999), which is defined as "taking prudent steps in the face of incomplete knowledge" (p. 252). Gordon Durnil (in Raffensperger and Tickner, 1999, pp. 266-276), an attorney who has served as Chair of the U.S.-Canada International Joint Commission, also raises the question, "How much information do we need before exercising precaution?" Therefore, with cancer or other threats to our health, where there is incomplete but accumulating evidence that there is an association between environmental risk factors and the development of acute and chronic diseases, we should have policies that err on the side of "precaution." Our lives, young and old, should be treated no differently than the bridges we cross daily (Davis, 2002, p.190). If we cannot know for certainty whether a particular action will cause harm, then we should, at least, use good judgment to "foresee and forestall" as Rachel Carson advised. This should be part of our cost-benefit analysis for the lives and health of future generations rely on this kind of analysis.

Threats to our health and to our environment should not be sacrificed for some immediate industrial benefit. "When Rachel Carson completed her book, *Silent Spring*, she dedicated it to Albert Schweitzer who said, 'Man has lost the capacity to foresee and forestall . . . He will end up destroying the earth' (Raffensperger and Tickner, 1999, p.1). Let us hope that this is not the case. If one is to evaluate the benefits of new environmental safeguards, my life is worth more than 63% of a younger person and the lives of my children and their children also should not be based on that kind of calculation.

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Devra Davis. *When Smoke Ran Like Water: Tales of Environmental Deception and the Battle Against Pollution*. New York, Basic Books, 2002

Linda Lear. *Rachel Carson, Witness for Nature*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1997.

Carolyn Raffensperger and Joel Tickner, Editors. *Protecting Public Health and the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle*. Washington D.C., Island Press, 1999.

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Karen S. Peterson  
6307 Caton Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15217